

COACHING CHILDREN AS THEY CREATE A MUSICAL COMPOSITION

In her book, Improvisation, Music from the Inside Out, Mildred Portney Chase writes:

*The more technical our world becomes,
the more essential it is that we see the
whole of life as an art form, protecting
the creative nature of mankind from an
exclusively symbiotic existence with
electronics..¹*

In teaching music to our children, are we always thinking about creativity and life, or do we sometimes get into the rut of worrying about how we will look when our students play in recitals, take syllabus evaluations, enter competitions and the like. Do we leave the teaching of composition to composer teachers (a small minority), because we either feel inadequate to teach this aspect of our art or do not understand the importance of composition in the musical and overall development of our students?

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

BRAIN DEAD: Sometimes students find it difficult to begin a composition. They will tell their teacher that they don't have any ideas or can't think of anything. The following are a few suggestions for getting started:

1. Ask the student to **brain storm**. Tell her to write down all the wonderful places she would like to visit, her favorite animals or pets, her best vacations, the things she likes to do in her free time, etc. From the list created, the student may choose an idea for her composition.
2. Tell the child to put her fingers on the **black keys** and play anything. Any combination of notes, played on these keys, will sound fine.
3. Study an easy composition such as "Melody" by Diabelli.² Notice the **shape of the melody lines** and draw them on paper or in the air. Give the student a starting note and ask her to write a melody using one of the shapes.
4. Give the student a rhythmic pattern and a starting note and ask him to write an **ostinato** bass. (You can teach "ostinato" by singing a song: "*Ostinato, ostinato, what are you, what are you? Funny little pattern, funny little pattern, stubborn, too; stubborn, too*" (sing to the tune of *Frere Jacques*).
5. Start with a **chord progression**. Study different accompaniment types such as alberti bass, arpeggiated chords, etc. Encourage the student to follow the chord progression with her favorite accompaniment pattern. The melody will be written later.

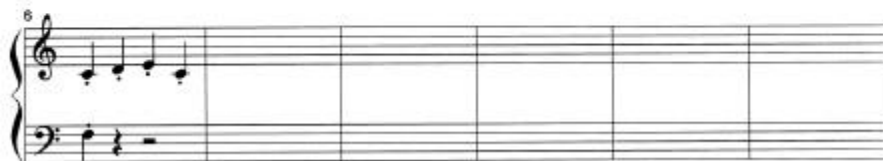
6. Start with a **story** written by the student or a **picture** drawn by him. Music may then be written to create sound effects, background, or illustrate the narration. This project will give the writer experience in writing film or stage music.
7. **Play many examples of fine music** for your students. There are numerous short pieces, which contain ingenious musical devices, by contemporary composers such as Donald Waxman, Dmitri Kabalevsky, Bela Bartok, Alexander Gretchaninov, and Vladimir Rebikov that may inspire pupils to write in an imaginative style.

FROZEN ABOVE THE KEYS: Although improvisation is part of composition, it is not necessary for a person to be a “natural” improviser to compose. I have had students gifted in the art of improvisation who did not have the interest or self-discipline to write a good composition. On the other hand, occasionally a student, asked to improvise a measure, will look at the piano as if it is a time bomb ready to explode when touched. One way to make improvisation into a game is to put students in a group and play “melodic conversation.”³ Put up to four students at each available piano and assign each child five black keys. The teacher uses another piano or a keyboard and plays a pentatonic pattern. Keeping the beat, which should be established at the beginning of the game, students alternate with the teacher and make up melodic patterns. Another variation of this idea is to form two lines of students at one piano. One student improvises a pentatonic measure, then the first person from the other line adds a second measure. Students in the two lines alternate so that the student who has just played has a chance to go to the back of the line.

The use of tone clusters may help a “frozen” student improvise. Ask the student to demonstrate, by playing tone clusters, how an elephant, squirrel, snow, leaves falling, a giant walking, a baby crawling etc. sounds.

MELODY VS. ACCOMPANIMENT: Whether to start with the melody or accompaniment is often a big decision for the teacher. It appears to be relatively easy for most students to write a simple melody after the concepts of parallel, contrasting, question and answer phrases have been thoroughly discussed and melody shapes have been introduced. The following are some suggestions for adding an accompaniment:

1. Look to see if the melody notes in a measure suggest a chord outline. If so, use notes of the chord for the accompaniment. If the melody is moving quickly, use long notes. Conversely, if the melody seems to be dragging, put shorter notes in the accompaniment.



2. Sometimes a canon will work. Try starting the melody in canonic form at the beginning of the second measure or someplace else.



3. Use harmonic intervals, such as fifths or fourths, in the bass. These may be coupled with sections of unisons.



4. Don't forget the ostinato bass suggested above. Also, anything works when using the pentatonic or whole tone scales.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, my experience in starting with the accompaniment first has centered around assigning a chord progression or beginning with an ostinato bass.

DEVELOPING IDEAS - A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY

The converse of the child who does not have any ideas is one who has numerous creations and wishes to use them all in one short composition. If he is not shown how to correlate unity and variety, the resulting composition will sound like the contents of a filled garbage can. The teacher might look at a student's work and become very excited about one motive, phrase, period or section. Since this excerpt is "so good," the student may be encouraged to develop it. The other ideas can be saved for another section of the piece or a different composition. The following thoughts are some well-known devices for developing a motive or phrase:

1. Change the rhythm by changing the length of the notes (augmentation or diminution), repeating notes, repeating rhythms, shifting rhythms to different beats, adding upbeats, changing the meter etc.
2. Change the intervals through the devices of retrograde, inversion or retrograde inversion; adding or omitting intervals; filling up intervals with added notes (embellishment); repeating features or adding features to other beats (See *Winter Song* by Kabalevsky)⁴.

3. Change the harmony by using inversions, making additions at the end or insertions in the middle or substituting a different chord in a place where the melody is repeated. Two excellent models which use some of these devices are *Children's Song* by Bartok⁵ and *Indian Ceremony* by Waxman⁶.
4. Transpose a motive and/or add passing harmonies (Again, see *Winter Song*).

BUILDING THE COMPOSITION

Children seem to respond with more enthusiasm and less frustration if they are given short specific assignments. I often start with a four to eight measure assignment and build from there. Depending on the maturity and musical level of the child, I will probably encourage her to develop a composition in one of my favorite forms for beginners: ABA, ABCBA (arch), or ABACA (rondo). The form is not discussed at the beginning, however. The emphasis is merely on the "simple" task of creating a phrase or period. Later, when the student begins to get excited about his work, he may be encouraged to write a "new" phrase or period in a different key. Usually, a simple transition may be written, with the teacher's help, to connect the sections. Actually, the student is often only "burdened" with the creation of one phrase since that may be developed through the devices listed above (beginners love the retrograde - it is so easy and often makes even a dull melody sparkle).

LOOKING FOR STRENGTHS

In working with students and their compositions, it is extremely important to avoid criticism. There is always something "good" about every composition. Maybe the child has an interesting rhythm pattern (remember that "interesting" means at the level of the child, not necessarily interesting to the teacher). Maybe the composition contains a leap or some repeated notes or strays from outlining chord tones. Maybe it just outlines the C Major triad over and over ("Wow! you really understand C Major! Actually, think about the millions of people in the world who have never heard of a C Major chord and you'll agree that your student **IS** brilliant). From the C Major outline, you might encourage the student to venture into some non harmonic tones.

In trying to help the student broaden, use sentences such as, "How would it be if ..." or "You might experiment with..." I believe that some suggestions are in order so that the student will improve and learn new ways to compose. However, I know sadly from experience, that some children do not want to change their compositions in any way ("I like it the way it is") and that some students will take any suggestions as forms of criticism. Watch the child's body language and back off immediately if you sense resistance. The child is letting the teacher see some of her soul, through her composition, and the teacher must respect and cherish that. Forget theory "rules" and let the child create in his own way.

MANUSCRIPT MISERY

Writing the manuscript can cause misery for both the student and teacher. The "fun" is in the improvisation and creation, and the drudgery begins when the student is asked to write the notes on paper. I believe that it is best for the teacher to "scribe" for a beginning student. As the child improvises, write the notes on manuscript paper. When the composition is completed, ask the student to copy one measure every day. A parent should check the work each day, because there is nothing that will discourage a young child more than to complete her piece and discover that

measures four and seven have been omitted. I think that the way to avoid manuscript misery is to work very slowly, give lots of praise, and constantly check the manuscript. As the student becomes more experienced, this stage of composing will become easier.

Some children actually enjoy writing their music. Often it is quite a challenge for the teacher to read what has been written, but by combining listening to the music with reading it, one can usually solve the puzzle. Students may be encouraged to use their own notation (anything that will remind them of their creation) and to tape their improvisation.

Even if the composition will be computer generated, I ask my students to write it on manuscript paper first. Students internalize the concept of key and time signatures, learn about the direction and length of note stems, become aware of the importance of aligning notes etc. The list is endless.

TIME MANAGEMENT

In their already crowded schedules, teachers wonder when they will have time to teach composition. I like to work in groups and have had composition classes in which interested students stimulate each other. Some years, these classes have been a separate part of my program, and each student has paid a fee. This year, I am offering two classes to my students as part of their theory class program (every student is required to be in at least one theory class). One of the composition classes involves my coaching young children in the creation of piano compositions and the other is an orchestration class for more advanced students. Some teachers spend about five minutes at each lesson with all their students and some have composition camps in the summer.

A PRICELESS PRIZE

Is the end result worth all the work? I think it is. Students who compose appear to understand the music of other composers better than those who do not write, and the psychological benefit of performing your own composition or hearing it performed by another can not be matched. I once was asked to FAX the compositions of a student to Taiwan where her grandfather was being buried. The custom was to send the deceased Home with things of importance. The granddaughter's compositions were considered worthy of that honor. Other students have traveled hours in order to perform a short composition at a state convention, and many have received great pleasure when their compositions were part of a student recital. Let us encourage our students to open their hearts, minds, and creative powers so that new music will continue to be written for future generations.

Notes

1. Chase, Mildred Portney. *Improvisation*. Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Co., 1988, p.9.
2. Diabelli, Antonio. "Melody" found in *Minor Masters* by Frances Clark (Princeton, N.J.: The New School For Music Study, 1983) p.6.
3. *Melodic Conversation* was adapted from the Kodaly Method (Zoltan Kodaly).
4. Kabalevsky, Dmitri. "Winter Song" found in *Music Pathways Repertoire 4A* by Olson, Bianchi, Blickenstaff (Carl Fischer, 1974) p. 30.
5. Bartok, Bela. "Children's Song" found in *For Children* by Bela Bartok (Boosey & Hawkes, 1947) p. 3.
6. Waxman, Donald. "Indian Ceremony" found in *Pageants for Piano, First Piano Pageant* by Donald Waxman (N.Y.: Galaxy Music Corp., 1958) p. 21.